

INTRODUCTION OF WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT TROUT TO LITTLE TEPEE CREEK, MADISON RIVER DRAINAGE

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region Three, Bozeman
July 12, 2010**

Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to introduce native westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) into Little Tepee Creek, a fishless stream in the Madison River drainage near West Yellowstone, MT. The project is designed to increase the overall distribution of WCT, a rare native species in the upper Missouri River drainage, and to preserve the genetic legacy of local “at risk” populations.

Montana Environmental Policy Act

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess significant potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on May 3, 2010.

Public comments on the proposed project were taken for 30 days (through June 1, 2010). The EA was mailed to 43 individuals and groups. A legal notice indicating release of the EA was sent to local media including the *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, the *Madisonian* (Ennis), and the *West Yellowstone News*. In addition, the Draft EA was posted on the FWP webpage: <http://fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices/>.

Summary of Public Comment and FWP Response

Five public comments were received during the 30 day EA review period. Four supporting comments were received from local and regional sporting groups, and a local individual. Comments included: “The Foundation enthusiastically endorses the department’s plan”, “This is a wonderful project which will expand the habitat range of our state fish of Montana”, and “It is important that we try to find areas like Little Tepee Creek to help with the WCT restoration efforts, keeping the genetic integrity intact.” The Gallatin National Forest also provided a supporting letter that was attached to the draft EA.

One individual’s comment was supportive of WCT conservation, though not supportive of introducing fish to a fishless stream, as in the case of Little Tepee Creek, or allowing potential harvest of WCT. The comment in full: “*While I support the effort to help grow the WCT population, I wish it did not involve establishing populations in previously fishless waters. I hope future projects are confined to historically occupied waters. Given the difficulty and expense of this effort, the sensitivity of the areas involved, and the continuing development pressure, I’m surprised FWP would consider allowing this population to be*

fished. It seems more prudent to protect this population at least until the species is no longer threatened. I hope you will consider this. Thank you for your time."

Response: FWP recognizes that fishless waters can provide important habitats for animal species which do not normally co-exist with fish. This is particularly true in fishless lakes where some native amphibians can be significantly impacted by fish introductions. However, native fauna residing in the Little Tepee Creek drainage have co-evolved and co-exist with WCT in numerous streams, and as addressed in the EA (page 9 and 10), no significant impacts to sensitive species (invertebrates or amphibians) would be expected with an introduction of WCT to the fishless reach of the stream. WCT foraging may lead to changes in the abundance of some aquatic invertebrate species, though elimination of a species from the 2 mile stream reach is unlikely. Naturally fishless reaches are common in many headwater streams, but habitat conditions in most are not suitable for viable WCT populations (e.g., the water is too cold or the fishless reach is too short). Little Tepee Creek is unique in that the currently fishless reach could potentially support an estimated 400 – 800 resident trout.

As stated in the EA: "Westslope cutthroat trout are currently protected by catch-and-release regulations in streams in the Madison River drainage, but restoration efforts like the proposed action are intended to increase overall WCT abundance to allow future harvest of the species in this and other streams". Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks would only consider allowing limited angler harvest of WCT in Little Tepee Creek after the population has reached carry capacity of the stream (likely 5 – 10 years), and after thorough evaluation of the population size and age structure. The stream is a relatively small, and angler use would likely be very limited. If WCT harvest was permitted, the population would be closely monitored with harvest regulations adjusted as necessary.

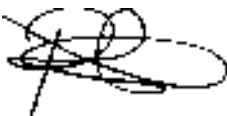
Final Environmental Assessment for the introduction of WCT to Little Tepee Creek

There are no modifications necessary to the Draft Environmental Assessment based on public comment. The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment, public comment, and the need preserve WCT in the Madison River drainage, it is my decision to proceed with the effort to introduce WCT to Little Tepee Creek starting in the summer of 2010.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.



Patrick J. Flowers
Region Three Supervisor
